EXHIB. FRENCH GOTHIC TAPESTRIES
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
OF ART
May 26 - Sept. 16, 1928

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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

FRENCH GOTHIC TAPESTRIES

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CATALOGUE OF A LOAN EXHIBITION OF FRENCH GOTHIC TAPESTRIES

MAY 26 TO SEPTEMBER 16

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GEORGE D. PRATT

HAROLD IRVING PRATT

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INTRODUCTION

The remarkable development of tapestry weaving in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was due to several causes. The gradual cessation of cathedral building – the preoccupation of early mediaeval art – had released talent for other purposes. Artists were no longer unsophisticated, as they had been in the preceding period when the principles of Gothic art and its system of ornament were being determined under the tutelage of architecture; they were now highly accomplished, adequate both in number and in capability for any demand that might be made upon them. Patronage of the arts no longer rested almost exclusively with the Church. The growth of individualism was accompanied by the amassment of private fortunes; and as noble and burgher increased in wealth, greater luxury surrounded them in their homes. Under these new conditions, the arts of decoration flourished, and none more than the craft of the tapestry weavers, whose storied hangings brought color and diverting pattern to the somber Gothic interior, and served as precious gifts to the Church.

Among the centers of tapestry weaving toward the end of the fourteenth century and in the beginning of the fifteenth, Paris was of notable importance. The cartoons for its weavers were supplied by the artists from the Low Countries who at this time dominated all forms of artistic expression at the courts of France and Burgundy. In style, these productions show na-

tive French tradition modified by Flemish and Italian influence. Unhappily, surviving examples of these early Franco-Flemish tapestries of the Paris and Arras ateliers are rare. The type is superbly represented in this exhibition by the Annunciation tapestry (No. 1) lent by Harold Irving Pratt.

The leadership in tapestry production passed to Arras and Tournai when the disasters of the Hundred Years' War put an end to the early prosperity of the Paris looms. The industry had long been established in both these Lowland cities. At first, Arras was the more important, but in the second quarter of the fifteenth century Tournai[1] came to the front, and held the supremacy until succeeded by Brussels in the sixteenth century. Politically, Tournai formed part of the French royal domain from the time of Philippe Auguste until early in the sixteenth century; but culturally it belonged to the Low Countries.

Tournai, whence came most of the great tapestries of the fifteenth century – hunting scenes and other genre subjects, narratives of battles, legends, and saintly lives (exemplified in this exhibition by two pieces of the Saint Peter set, woven for the Bishop

[1] The cartoon painters of Tournai and other cities in the Low Countries are discussed by Dr. Phyllis Ackerman in Recently Identified Designers of Gothic Tapestries, published in The Art Bulletin, vol. IX, no. 2 (December, 1926). This article, embodying in brief form the results of Dr. Ackerman's researches concerning designers' signatures, is a most important contribution to the study of tapestries.

of Beauvais, Nos. 2 and 3)—developed a borderland style that mingles French and Flemish traits. The cartoons of four (Nos. 5-8) of the six tapestries of the Hunt of the Unicorn, which we are privileged to include in this exhibition, are presumably the work of a Tournai designer. The animation of the scenes, the vigorous drawing of the strongly individualized figures, the complexity of the compositions bespeak Flemish influence. At the same time, there is evident a clarity of design and a love of flowery mead and wooded landscape that is thoroughly French. These four tapestries combine the best of both traditions. The other two that complete the set are more purely French in style. Together, they count among the finest achievements of the Gothic tapestry looms.

With the revival of industry after the conclusion of peace between France and England in 1453 there appears to have been a considerable production of tapestries in the region of the Loire toward the close of the fifteenth century and in the early years of the sixteenth.

Touraine tapestries include religious subjects; allegories, such as the handsome Triumph of Time (No. 16) lent by George D. Pratt; and "histories" of the type so delightfully represented by the two Lucretia tapestries (Nos. 14 and 15) lent by Felix M. Warburg. Perhaps the most characteristic productions, however, are the millefleurs, of which the exhibition includes three superlative examples, lent by Mr. and

Mrs. Arthur Lehman (No. 10), the Hon. Andrew W. Mellon (No. 11), and George and Florence Blumenthal (Nos. 12-13).

In early Gothic tapestries, the landscape backgrounds, highly conventionalized, are embellished with quaint little flowering plants. When these are combined to form a solid background, a mosaic, as it were, of flowers and leaves, we have the millefleurs. This type of tapestry continued in favor into the sixteenth century. As time went on, the drawing became more naturalistic. Sometimes, as in No. 11, flowering sprays were substituted for the plant motives. Small animals, such as birds and rabbits, usually enliven these fields of a "thousand flowers." Occasionally there are trees, often laden with fruit, to give variety in scale. Against these vernal backgrounds, coats of arms are shown, or groups of playing children, shepherds and shepherdesses, or, most popular of all, lords and ladies pleasantly engaged in hunting, holding gallant conversations, or listening to music.

French characteristics appear clearly in the tapestries of Touraine. They are less confused in composition than the Flemish; the figures are larger in proportion to the size of the tapestries; the costumes are more faithfully studied from actuality; the colors, among which shades of rose are popular, are gayer, more limpid. They have the charm that is the unfailing distinction of French art.

JOSEPH BRECK.

NO. I THE ANNUNCIATION

NO. 9 THE UNICORN ENCLOSED

CATALOGUE

1 THE ANNUNCIATION

Franco-Flemish, about 1400

H. 11 FT. 4 IN., W. 9 FT. 6 IN.

LENT BY HAROLD IRVING PRATT

This tapestry is of exceptional interest, not only for its early date – since few tapestries of this period now exist – but also for its vigorous design and rich, full-hued coloring. It is a masterpiece worthy to be classed with the famous tapestries of the Apocalypse in the Cathedral of Angers, designed by Jean de Bandol, known as Jean de Bruges (who was paid for his cartoons in 1377,-78,-79), and woven by Nicolas Bataille of Paris and his successors.

The cartoon for the Annunciation tapestry has been ascribed to Willem van Roome (cf. Introduction, p. viii). It recalls in many respects the Annunciation painted by Melchior Broederlam in 1399 on one of the shutters of a reredos now in the Dijon Museum. Analogies have also been noted with a set of six panel paintings of the Paris school in the Cuvellier Collection at Niort and the Mayer Van der Bergh Collection at Antwerp. Although it may not be possible to identify with certainty the designer of the Pratt Annunciation, the tapestry is clearly related in style to the productions of the Netherlandish artists and their followers who worked for the courts of France and Burgundy in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

2-3 TWO SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF SAINT PETER

French, Tournai, 1460

[2] TABITHA RAISED FROM THE DEAD

H. 4 FT. 10 IN., W. 4 FT. 5 IN.

[3] APPARITION OF THE ANGEL TO CORNELIUS

H. 5 FT., W. 4 FT.

LENT BY THE HON. ANDREW W. MELLON

These tapestries form part of the set picturing the life of Saint Peter, completed in 1460 for Guillaume de Hellande, Bishop of Beauvais, and presented by him to the Cathedral of Saint Peter at Beauvais. Most of the set, of which twenty-three scenes exist, is still at Beauvais; four pieces are in three private collections in America. The coats of arms are those of the donor (Hellande quartering Montmorency with an inescutcheon of Néele de Lozinghem), and of the Bishopric of Beauvais (gold, a red cross, cantoned with four keys of the same). The word PAIX (peace), which occurs frequently on the tapestries, is a joyful allusion to the truce concluded in 1444 during the Hundred Years' War between France and England, shortly before Bishop Guillaume's elevation to the see. Several pieces of the set are signed, according to Dr. Ackerman (cf. Introduction, p. viii), by Jean II of the le Quien family of Tournai tapestry designers.

For the resurrection of Tabitha, see The Acts of the Apostles IX:36-42. The French inscription on the scroll above the figures may be translated: "How at Joppa St. Peter raised from the dead Tabitha, a good charitable woman." For the short inscription beside the head of Saint Peter the translation is: "Tabitha, arise."

The apparition of the angel to Cornelius is related in The Acts of the Apostles X:1-8. The longer of the two inscriptions, in French, reads in translation: "How the angel showed himself to Cornelius the centurion, saying that he should send and ask Saint Peter for his salvation." The shorter inscription, on the scroll carried by the angel, is translated: "Send and call Simon."

4-9 THE HUNT OF THE UNICORN

French, about 1500

[4] THE HUNTERS SEEK THE UNICORN

H. 11 FT., W. 10 FT. 4 IN.

[5] THE UNICORN AT THE FOUNTAIN

H. 11 FT., W. 12 FT.

[6] THE UNICORN TRIES TO ESCAPE

H. 11 FT., W. 13 FT.

[7] THE UNICORN DEFENDS HIMSELF

H. 11 FT., W. 13 FT.

[8] THE UNICORN IS KILLED OR WOUNDED, AND BROUGHT TO THE LADY OF THE CASTLE

H. 11 FT., W. 12 FT.

[9] THE UNICORN ENCLOSED

H. 11 FT., W. 12 FT.

LENT BY FRIENDS

The subject of these tapestries is not, as might appear at first sight, merely the hunt and capture of a fabulous animal. The chase is an allegory of the Incarnation of Our Lord, Who is figured in the tapestries by the unicorn, symbol of purity. It is related in the old bestiaries that this animal could be captured only by a virgin. Attracted to her by his love of chastity, the unicorn would rest his head in her lap, thus permitting the hunters to approach and capture him. In the first tapestry (No. 4) we see the hunters setting forth in search of the unicorn. In some representations of this allegory there are only two hunters, God and Gabriel, who are accompanied by four (or seven) hounds, symbolizing the Virtues. But the designer of the set here exhibited appears to have been moved less by the religious significance of his theme than by the opportunity it afforded for the representation of the picturesque incidents of a great hunting party, and for the two hunters he has substituted a gay company of sportsmen. Probably reminiscent of the compositions in which the Archangel Gabriel appeared is the inscription on the scabbard of one of the figures in the left foreground of No. 7 reading: AVE REGINA C (OELORUM), "Hail, Queen of Heaven."

In No. 5, the hunters have surrounded the unicorn who, kneeling, dips his horn in a stream flowing from a fountain. It was believed in the Middle Ages that the horn of the

unicorn possessed the virtue of detecting poison. According to legend, the animals of the forest would not drink from a pool until the unicorn had first purified it with his horn. The animals in the foreground of the tapestry, save the snarling cur symbolizing the devil, exemplify various qualities of Christ: the lion, His strength; the panther, His sweet savour; the stag and the weasel, destroyers of snakes, His power over evil.

In the third (No. 6) and fourth (No. 7) pieces of the set, the unicorn is attacked and defends himself.

In the fifth (No. 8), he is wounded or killed, and the body, thrown over the back of a horse, is brought to the châtelaine (the Virgin Mary), who has come with her husband from the castle on the outskirts of the woods to greet the returning hunters.

The last tapestry (No. 9), representing the accomplishment of the Incarnation, shows the unicorn, against a background of millefleurs, chained within the *hortus conclusus,* the enclosed garden, which symbolizes the Blessed Virgin.

This magnificent set of tapestries, splendidly enriched with silk and gold, comes from the château of Verteuil, the ancestral seat of the family of La Rochefoucauld. According to one tradition, the set was woven about 1450 to commemorate the marriage of Jean de la Rochefoucauld with Marguerite de Barbezieux; according to another, the tapestries were made for François de la Rochefoucauld, the godfather of François I, King of France.

Neither tradition is substantiated by the cipher which is repeated in several places on each of the tapestries, occurring even on the collars of some of the hounds. This cipher, combining the initials of the lord and lady for whom the tapestries were made, is composed of the letters A and E, the latter reversed. That the second initial is not the letter M turned on its side, as it has been claimed, appears certain from the A and E unreversed clearly inscribed on the collar of one of the dogs in the first tapestry of the set (No. 4). On the collar of another dog in this same tapestry, a coat of

arms is thrice repeated, separated by the letter A. The arms have been identified by Robert T. Nichol of the Museum staff as those of the great family of Chavagnac d'Amandine (Auv.): sable, 2 bars gold, in chief 3 roses of same, quartering Du Bost la Blanche (Forez): gold, 3 escutcheons gules. Two inconspicuous inscriptions on the tapestries have been read by Dr. Ackerman (cf. Introduction, p. viii) as the signature of the Tournai tapestry designer, Jean III of the le Quien family.

It will be noticed that the ciphers on the first and last tapestries of the set are slightly different from those on the other four pieces. The backgrounds also differ. Unlike the naturalistic landscapes in the other pieces of the set, which show at the top a narrow strip of sky (destroyed and replaced by canvas), the backgrounds of Nos. 4 and 9 are of the millefleurs type. Moreover, the figures in No. 4 are inferior in drawing to the others, and lack the vivacity that characterizes the rest of the set.

It may consequently be assumed that two ateliers were concerned in the production of these tapestries. Nos. 4 and 9 were presumably designed and woven in Touraine. Even without the evidence of the reputed signature of Jean III le Quien, the style of Nos. 5, 6, 7, and 8 suggests the probability of a Tournai origin, at least for the cartoons. In date, both groups may be assigned to about 1500.

10 MILLEFLEURS WITH FIVE YOUTHS AT PLAY

French, Touraine, about 1500

H. 8 FT. 9 IN., W. 10 FT. 5 IN.

LENT BY MR. AND MRS. ARTHUR LEHMAN

Against a background of millefleurs, five boys are playing a game. One, with his hat pulled down over his eyes to blindfold him, is swinging a whip with a shoe tied to the end of the lash; the others dodge the blows. On the tree behind the central figure is a scroll inscribed: LE TEMPS SCION, "Time

[also] whips." Among the flowers to the right of this group are playthings: two balls, two sticks, and a ring. A snake emerging from the tree trunk, a snail, and a lizard add their interest to the composition. A cipher (DG) is repeated on the lower corners of the tapestry. Originally the upper corners were similarly decorated, but about a foot or so of the tapestry has been destroyed at the top.

11 HUNTING SCENE

French, Touraine, about 1500

H. 7 FT. 7 IN., W. 11 FT.

LENT BY THE HON. ANDREW W. MELLON

Seated on a flowery bank, a lady with a falcon looks at a dead heron, held up by a huntsman kneeling in front of her. The red background is strewn with sprays of flowers, among which pheasants and other birds occur.

The placing of the figures upon an "island" distinct from the background, the color of the background, and the floral sprays that decorate it recall the celebrated tapestries of the Lady with the Unicorn from the château of Boussac near Aubusson, now in the Cluny Museum, Paris.

12 THE DEPARTURE FOR THE HUNT

French, Touraine, about 1500

H. 8 FT. 9½ IN., W. 12 FT. 6 IN.

LENT BY GEORGE AND FLORENCE BLUMENTHAL

Riding a white horse, a lady carries a falcon on her hand; a huntsman, standing in front of her, displays a bird that has been brought down. Another horse, to the right, bears a young man, behind whom a lady is seated; a dog on a leash accompanies them. Two birds fly above the group. The background is composed of a great variety of flowering plants on a deep blue ground.

This and the preceding item are exceptionally fine examples of millefleurs with scenes of the chase. Hunting, particularly

in the form of falconry, was one of the favorite pastimes of the mediaeval lords and ladies, and quite naturally afforded popular material for the tapestry designers.

13 SHEPHERD AND SHEPHERDESSES

French, Touraine, about 1500

H. 8 FT. 5 IN., W. 10 FT.

LENT BY GEORGE AND FLORENCE BLUMENTHAL

A shepherdess quarrels with a shepherd, who holds up his hands in protest. To the right of this group is a young shepherdess. Behind her and in the foreground are sheep. Flowering plants form the background for this rustic scene. In amusing contrast to such aristocratic diversions as hunting, concerts, and promenades in pleasant meadows, Gothic tapestries sometimes show us the humble occupations and lusty pleasures of the peasant. Of this type No. 13 is an admirable example.

14-15 TWO SCENES FROM THE HISTORY OF LUCRETIA

French, Touraine, beginning of the XVI century

[14] LUCRETIA SURPRISED BY HER HUSBAND, COLLATINUS, AND SEXTUS TARQUINUS

H. 6 FT. 10 IN., W. 7 FT. 10 IN.

[15] LUCRETIA ENTERTAINS SEXTUS; HE ATTACKS HER VIRTUE

H. 6 FT. 10 IN., W. 7 FT. 10 IN.

LENT BY FELIX M. WARBURG

A third tapestry of this set, also owned by Mr. Warburg, represents Lucretia welcoming Sextus. Livy, in his History of Rome, relates that at a banquet given by Sextus Tarquinus to the young chiefs and princes in the Roman army besieging Ardea, a dispute arose concerning the virtue of their

wives. On the suggestion of Collatinus, they visited their homes by surprise. Lucretia, the wife of Collatinus, was found still at work amid her handmaidens, although it was late at night. At the sight of the virtuous Lucretia, Sextus became inflamed with passion, and returned a few days later alone. He was hospitably received by Lucretia as her husband's kinsman, and entertained at supper. When all had retired, he entered her room, and by threats forced her to yield to his wishes. After his departure, Lucretia sent for her husband and her father, told what had happened, enjoined them to avenge her dishonor, and then stabbed herself to death. Subjects derived from classical sources are not uncommon in the period of these tapestries, but the personages are portrayed in contemporary costume and in the architectural setting of their own time. To this custom we owe such a delightful genre scene as that of Lucretia at her kneeling-desk, surrounded by her maidens, who are winding wool, weaving, and embroidering under their mistress' direction, as we might have seen them in any French château of the late Gothic period.

The unusual red-ground borders with balanced designs of scrolling sprays of flowers and grape vines entwined with knotted ribbons indicate as the date of these tapestries the early years of the sixteenth century, when the Renaissance style was gradually supplanting the older tradition, a view supported by the large scale of the figures and the pictorial character of the compositions.

16 THE TRIUMPH OF TIME

French, Touraine, beginning of the XVI century

H. 12 FT. 4 IN., W. 11 FT. 7 IN.

LENT BY GEORGE D. PRATT

Seated on a triumphal car drawn by two stags, Time drives over the recumbent figure of Fame, whose multiple trumpet lies in fragments about her. He holds a clock, and is attended by his adherents, Nestor, Noah, and Methuselah.

Above his head is the zodiac, while sun and moon witness his triumph. The French inscriptions on the two scrolls above the group may be translated: "Aroused after noisy squabbles and debates, Time, old and broken, fearing no foeman (literally, without fearing anyone carrying arms) has caused Fame several alarms, and from the highest place has toppled her down."

Another part of this tapestry, representing the triumph of Fame, is also owned by Mr. Pratt. These pieces originally formed part of a series depicting the triumph of Love, the triumph of Chastity over Love, the triumph of Death over Chastity, followed by the two just mentioned – Fame victorious over Death, and Time vanquishing Fame, and concluding with the triumph over all by Eternity in the form of the Holy Trinity. The same cartoons were used for a set of Triumphs in the Austrian State Collections, Vienna. An inscription on one of these tapestries is read by Dr. Ackerman (cf. Introduction, p. viii) as the signature of Bonaventure Thieffries, a tapestry designer of Tournai, who was apprenticed in 1505 and became a master in 1512. Tournai and Oudenarde as well as Touraine have been suggested as the place of manufacture, but the probabilities favor Touraine.

Inspired by the "Trionfi" of Petrarch, these allegories were a popular subject in the sixteenth century. The compositions, which recall the triumphal processions of ancient Rome, and the numerous personages drawn from Greek and Roman sources as well as from the Bible attest the growing taste for classical antiquity that marks the close of the Gothic period.

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